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# The Govan Stones *Revealed*

**Professor Stephen Driscoll** reports on a new display of the Govan Stones, ancient royal monuments which date to the earliest years of Christianity on the Clyde, and yet are little known outside the Clydebank area

**U**ntil recently, one of Scotland's best kept secrets has been the large collection of early medieval sculpture at Govan Old Church, which is surpassed numerically only by Iona and St Andrews. In terms of illuminating the Viking Age it outshines them both. The obscurity of the Govan Stones is not surprising – Govan's industrial shipbuilding fame eclipses its earlier history and renders its period as a royal British centre all but invisible.

Fortunately its substantial collection of sculpture provides a tangible link to Strathclyde, the lost kingdom of the northern Britons, and its artistry presents powerful evidence of the stature of these kings. The collection's origins are to be found in the Viking Age, when raiding and endemic warfare instigated by the Norse transformed the political landscape of Britain. On the Clyde, the destruction of Dumbarton in 870 AD by Vikings, was the catalyst for the formation of the new kingdom of Strathclyde. Over 45 sculptured stones are known from Govan making it the largest collection of Viking Age sculpture in Britain and deserving of greater prominence.

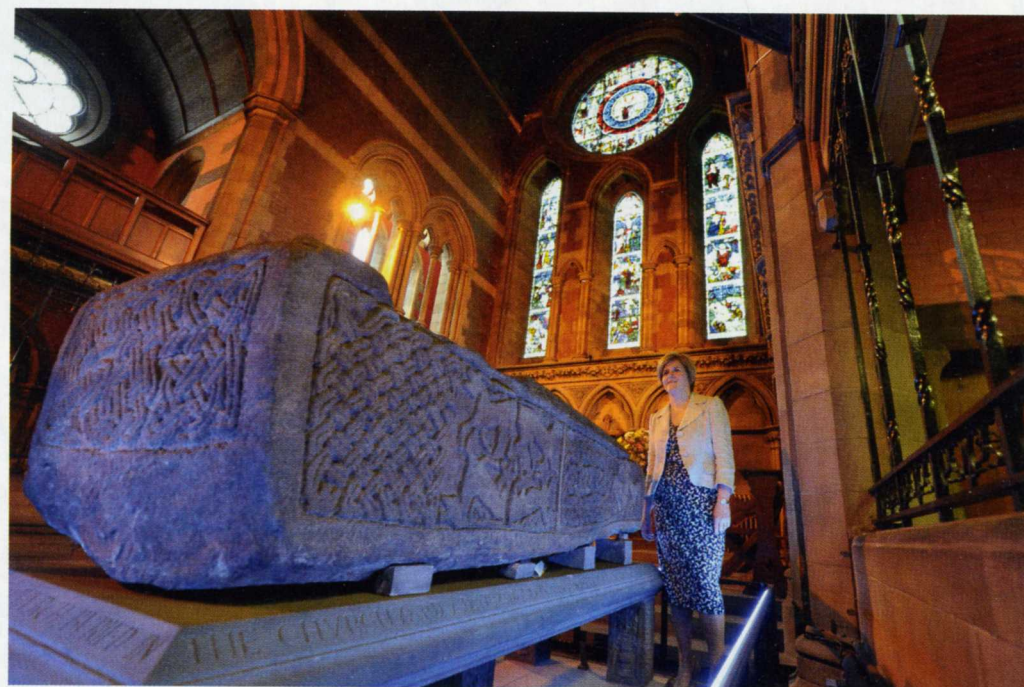
Although these stones have long been cherished by the local community, they are not well-known outside of Govan. The new display is intended to make them more accessible and more widely appreciated. The impetus to celebrate the Govan Stones came from local regeneration company, Govan Workspace Ltd, which recognised that Govan's prime cultural resource – the early medieval sculpture housed curated within R. Rowand Anderson's Gothic-revival masterpiece (built in 1888) – deserved better presentation, and set about raising the money. The background context was the need to create a sustainable future for Govan Old, which was made redundant in 2007, because the church was seen as central to wider efforts to rejuvenating central Govan.





By emphasising Govan's historic significance it was hoped to attract visitors and challenge negative stereotypes. An initial promise of funding from Historic Scotland helped to unlock grants from the Church of Scotland, the Heritage Lottery Fund and others, which supported a comprehensive programme of redisplay, marketing and volunteer recruitment. The programme was developed and designed by staff from the Jorvik Viking Centre working with their Glasgow colleagues at Northlight Heritage, building upon the existing work of the Friends of Govan Old.

The majority of the Govan Stones are burial monuments which marked the graves of the royalty and nobility of Strathclyde, probably including leading clerics. The bold carving style draws upon Celtic ornamental tradition, but clearly has been influenced by Scandinavian tastes. The most arresting monuments are the five massive sandstone blocks, commonly known as 'hogbacks'; they are in fact representations of mighty buildings: lordly halls and, probably, churches. Although hogbacks are found exclusively in areas in northern Britain settled by Vikings (southern Scotland, Cumbria and Yorkshire), the Govan examples are by far the largest and imposing. Their sheer bulk conveys the power of the warrior chieftains who forged the new kingdom of Strathclyde. Govan's sculptural masterpiece is the monolithic sarcophagus, decorated with interlace panels and figurative panels, which probably held the relics of St Constantine (the son of Kenneth Mac Alpine), who was martyred in 876 AD. It is a bold statement intended to create a royal patron saint for the new kingdom. The most common monuments are large recumbent cross-slabs designed as grave covers. Each slab is unique, but all use a repertoire of crosses set within interlace designs, which characterises the so-called 'Govan School' of sculpture. In addition to the funerary monuments there are four free-standing crosses,



which are an indication of the exceptional status of Govan Old as an ecclesiastical site. Govan is arguably the earliest Christian site on the Clyde with burials dating from the 5th to 6th century.

The Govan Stones Project is the first phase of a long-term programme to transform Govan Old into a vibrant

**Deputy First Minister Nicola Sturgeon unveils the Govan Stones**

**Local schoolchildren get to grips with the scale of the Stones**

community focal point which cherishes its living tradition of worship, encourages creative artistic endeavour and welcomes visitors as well as students. An early regeneration benefit of the Govan Stones project has been to stimulate conservation work in the historic churchyard by Glasgow City Council's Land and Environmental Services, which is restoring the ancient cemetery into a haven of calm in the heart of the city. Another indication of the growing awareness of Govan's unique asset is the request from the British Museum to feature one of the Govan hogbacks in their 2014 flagship exhibition *Vikings: Life and Legend*. These developments make it clear that cultural heritage assets are making the decisive contribution in turning the tide of urban decline in Govan.



### Find out more

You can find out more about the Govan Stones including opening times of Govan Old at [www.thegovanstones.org.uk](http://www.thegovanstones.org.uk). To learn more about Govan's remarkable history and archaeology you may wish to consult *Historic Govan* by C. Dalglish and S. Driscoll, a volume in Historic Scotland's burgh survey series, which is available from the Friends of Govan Old.